

Supervisor FRONTLINE

A newsletter from the WA State Employee Assistance Program

Questions



As a supervisor, I often struggle giving constructive feedback to employees. I am worried that they may become defensive and even resistant to my suggestions. Any tips on how to avoid this situation?



An employee says her husband is violent. She won't go to the EAP because she thinks he'll read her mind and know it. Some employees are worried for her, but he is the only spouse who has brought roses to the office! Frankly, he seems nice. What do you think is going on?

Answers



Feedback is more complex than it first appears. Not only is there a process for giving feedback, but there is also a bit of an art to responding to defensiveness. Many employees do not relish constructive criticism, despite its value, so listen calmly to what your employee has to say and be understanding. With empathy, say, "I understand your point." Receptiveness to feedback (or something akin to it) is then likely to follow, helped by your noninterference with the venting process. Do not equate defensiveness with denial or complete rejection. What follows is likely to be your employee's asking, "Can you explain more about what you mean?" This is an indication that acceptance is near. Your goal is not 100% agreement with your feedback but agreement that your feedback includes things to be considered. That's a win.



There are many possibilities, but you should still encourage her to visit or phone the EAP to discuss her situation in a confidential setting. A sudden crisis or incident may increase her motivation, but if she is a battered spouse, the reluctance you see now is not inconsistent with how victims of abuse sometimes react. This "battered spouse syndrome" frequently includes a belief or "omnipresent" feeling that the batterer is superior or in control of the victim. The victim may believe she is being watched. This PTSD-like response demonstrates true fear. Batterers sometimes demonstrate a pattern or cycle of growing tension, releasing it through battering, blaming the partner, and then demonstrating remorse and overindulgence (e.g., bringing roses to the office) to make up for the violence. The cycle then repeats. Do not eliminate the possibility of formally referring her to the EAP based on the impact on your work environment. It sounds drastic, but such a referral would be EAP-appropriate, and it could save lives.

Frontline Supervisor

Questions



I think it's important to coach my employees properly, and because we work in a customer service environment, being assertive is simply a skill that folks need to learn. Any tips?



As a new supervisor, I lack leadership experience and struggle with communication, delegation, and generally just trying to feel secure in my position. I admit to also feeling intimidated by those I supervise. Can the EAP help? Note, that we are very stressed and under-resourced.

Answers



Certainly there is nothing wrong with teaching your employees assertiveness skills. The depth to which you explore this subject, however, may touch on yours and your employees comfort or level of discomfort with conflict. Talk with your employees about the issues associated with resistance to being assertive. If the inability to be assertive creates a work performance issue, then refer your employees to the EAP. It may also be helpful for you to consult with EAP to develop a strategy to assist your employees. It can be tempting to analyze people and consider or explore their psychology. We all do it, but as a supervisor, you possess significant authority, and employees won't easily reject your attempts to drill down and ask personal questions or explore their personal issues. So proceed with awareness.



Yes, the EAP can help. You are describing a lack of experience but additional issues you touch on are worth examining. The issues you describe are very common to those new to leadership positions. There may be certain skills that are more difficult to learn or feel comfortable using than others. These may point to a need for education, mentoring or perhaps coaching by another supervisor with the experience to assist you. There are many ways to acquire the help you seek online or through books and possibly courses. As you improve your ability to manage workers, the EAP can help you tackle periodic roadblocks to success and job satisfaction.